

Message Text

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ACTION PM-05

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 NEA-10 ISO-00 CIAE-00 INR-07
NSAE-00 NSC-05 SP-02 SS-15 ACDA-12 /069 W
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R 161620Z DEC 77
FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1360
INFO AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD
AMEMBASSY TEHRAN
SECDEF WASHDC
CINCPACFLT
JCS
CNO

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 LONDON 20501

E.O. 11652: XGDS-1
TAGS: XB, MV, US, UK, UR
SUBJECT: SOVIET INTEREST IN GAN

REF: A) STATE 263518; B) LONDON 19015 (NOTAL) AND
PREVIOUS

SUMMARY AND PREFACE: FCO HAS NOW RECEIVED A REPORT
FROM ITS DEFENSE ATTACHE IN COLOMBO ON HIS VISIT
TO THE MALDIVES, FOR WHICH HE WAS GIVEN THE DEPART-
MENT'S FOUR QUESTIONS AS PER REFTEL A. HIS VISIT
DID NOT TURN UP ANY ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE OF SOVIET
INTEREST IN ACQUIRING MILITARY FACILITIES SUCH
AS NAVAL BUNKERING RIGHTS. THE FCO BELIEVES THE
MOST DETAILED INFORMATION ON SOVIET-MALDIVIAN
NEGOTIATIONS AND THE CURRENT STATUS OF GAN IS
CONTAINED IN AN ARTICLE AND INTERVIEW IN ASIA
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WEEK OF NOVEMBER 25. IN VIEW OF THE CURRENT USG
INTEREST IN THE INDIAN OCEAN, WE ARE REPORTING
BELOW EXCERPTS FROM THIS ARTICLE. END SUMMARY

1. FCO HAS NOW RECEIVED BY POUCH REPORT BY THE
BRITISH DEFENSE ATTACHE IN COLOMBO OF HIS VISIT
TO MALE IN THE MALDIVES, WHICH LASTED FROM NOVEMBER

26 TO 30. FOLLOWING A READING OF HIS REPORT (WHICH WAS SHOWN TO EMBOFF). FCO CONCLUDES THAT IT IS REASONABLE TO ASSUME THAT IT WAS THE SOVIET FISHERIES DELEGATION THAT WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR MAKING THE SOVIET BID FOR GAN LAST JUNE. WITH REGARD TO OUR QUESTION ABOUT EVIDENCE OF THE SOVIET DELEGATION'S INTEREST EXTENDING ALSO TO THE GRANT OF MILITARY FACILITIES SUCH AS NAVAL BUNKERING RIGHTS, THE FCO HAS "NO EVIDENCE OF THE DELEGATION'S INTEREST IN THE GRANT OF RIGHTS OUTSIDE GAN." THE DEFENSE ATTACHE DID NOT VISIT GAN, BUT THE FCO HAS GIVEN US A COPY OF ARTICLE IN ASIA WEEK ON GAN BY CORRESPONDENT ELIZABETH COLTON, WHICH WE SUMMARIZE BELOW.

2. THE BRITISH DEFENSE ATTACHE MET WITH THE MINISTER OF PUBLIC SAFETY, ABDUL HANNAN, WHO HAD JUST RETURNED FROM GAN, AND WITH THE MINISTER FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS, MOHAMED ZAHIR. THE ATTACHE CHARACTERIZED THE FORMER AS A "THOROUGHLY EVIL INDIVIDUAL," SUSPICIOUS AND ANTI-BRITISH. HOWEVER, THE ATTACHE GOT ON SUCH BETTER WITH MOHAMED ZAHIR, WHO APPROVED IN PRINCIPLE THE UK REQUEST THAT THE HMS AMAZON VISIT THE MALDIVES IN APRIL 1978. THE ATTACHE REPORTED THAT THERE IS SOME ANTI-BRITISH FEELING IN OTHER OFFICIAL CIRCLES IN THE MALDIVES.

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3. BEGIN UNCLASSIFIED. FOLLOWING ARE SALIENT EXCERPTS FROM ARTICLE BY ELIZABETH COLTON IN ASIA WEEK OF NOV. 25: BEGIN QUOTE. PRESIDENT IBRAHIM NASIR OF THE MALDIVES HAS JUST DONE ASIA - AND THE WEST - AN EXCEEDINGLY GOOD TURN BY REJECTING A \$1M. SOVIET OFFER TO LEASE GAN ISLAND, SITE OF AN ABANDONED BRITISH AIR BASE. THAT IS BIG MONEY IN THE MALDIVES - ENOUGH IN FACT, TO PAY FOR ABOUT A THIRD OF ITS ANNUAL IMPORTS. THE QUESTION NOW IS WHETHER NASIR, 51, HAS LOST HIS ONLY REAL CHANCE TO SOLVE THE SINGLE BIGGEST SOCIO-ECONOMIC PROBLEM CONFRONTING HIS WIDELY SCATTERED ISLAND REPUBLIC.

ALTHOUGH THE RUSSIANS TOLD THE MALDIVIAN GOVERNMENT THAT THEY INTENDED TO USE GAN MERELY AS A FISHERY BASE, THEIR REAL PURPOSE WAS TO ESTABLISH A COUNTERPOINT TO THE NEW ANGLO-AMERICAN MILITARY INSTALLATION ON DIEGO GARCIA, JUST 410 MI. FROM ADDU ATOLL WHERE GAN IS LOCATED. MOREOVER, MOSCOW VIEWED THE FORMER BRITISH BASE, WITH ITS EXCELLENT AIRFIELD AND HARBOUR FACILITIES, AS AN IDEAL POINT FROM WHICH TO "OVERSEE" JAPANESE AND CHINESE SHIPPING LANES FROM WEST ASIA.

NASIR AND HIS FIVE-MAN CABINET VOTED TO TURN DOWN

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FM AMEMBASSY LONDON
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THE SOVIET OFFER AFTER SEVERAL MONTHS OF SECRET
NEGOTIATIONS. INITIALLY, THE GOVERNMENT DECIDED TO
KEEP THE WHOLE AFFAIR UNDER WRAPS, EVIDENTLY OUT OF
A DESIRE TO AVOID ANTAGONIZING THE RUSSIANS...

BUT IN A RECENT EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW PRESIDENT RE-
VEALED IDENTITY OF THE WOULD-BE CLIENT...NASIR MADE
IT PLAIN THAT NEITHER HE NOR HIS PEOPLE WANT TO PLAY
HOST TO YET ANOTHER MAJOR POWER...THE MALDIVIANS DO
NOT WANT GAN TO BE USED AGAIN FOR ANY MILITARY
PURPOSE...THE GOVERNMENT IN MALE WAS SUSPICIOUS OF
MOSCOW'S STATED INTENTIONS...NASIR SWUNG HIS ARM TOWARD
THE WINDOW...ANCHORED IN THE CAPITAL'S BRILLIANTLY
BLUE HARBOUR WAS A SOVIET RESEARCH VESSEL CRAMMED WITH
ELECTRONIC GADGETRY. THE VESSEL IS ONE OF MANY THAT
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HAVE MOVED IN AND OUT OF THE MALDIVES IN EVER-INCREASING NUMBERS SINCE THE BRITISH QUIT GAN IN MARCH LAST YEAR. ASTONISHINGLY ENOUGH, THE RUSSIANS GAVE MALE NO ADVANCE NOTICE OF THE SHIP'S ARRIVAL. THE FIRST THAT MALDIVIAN GOVERNMENT KNEW OF IT WAS WHEN THE VESSEL PURRED INTO THE CHANNEL ON THE EASTERN RIM OF NORTH MALE ATOLL.

STILL, THE ARROGANCE WITH WHICH THE SOVIETS TREAT THE DEFENCELESS MALDIVIANS IS ALSO PRACTISED BY THE AMERICANS, WHOSE MILITARY AIRCRAFT FREQUENTLY VIOLATE THE REPUBLIC'S AIRSPACE. MALDIVIANS POSTED ON GAN REPORT THAT LARGE US SURVEILLANCE AIRCRAFT CAN BE SEEN SEVERAL TIMES A WEEK, SWOOPING LOW OVER ADDU ATOLL. THE PLANES HAVE BEEN SPOTTED AS FAR NORTH AS MALE, BUT COMPLAINTS TO THE US GOVERNMENT HAVE GONE UNHEEDED.

NASIR DOES NOT RULE OUT THE POSSIBILITY OF RENTING GAN TO ONE GOVERNMENT OR ANOTHER, PROVIDING IT'S NOT A BIG POWER AND DOESN'T HAVE ANY MILITARY TRICKS UP ITS SLEEVE. PLAINLY, HOWEVER, THE PRESIDENT WOULD PREFER TO LEASE THE ISLAND TO A PRIVATE INDUSTRIAL CONSORTIUM...DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOURISM INDUSTRY IS UNDER NASIR'S PERSONAL DIRECTION...THE PRESIDENT'S CHIEF PRIORITY IN HIS "INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME" IS COMPLETION OF A MODERN AIRPORT ON HULULE ISLAND, NEAR A STRING OF TOURIST RESORTS. ALMOST EVERY DAY NASIR MAKES A SPECIAL INSPECTION TRIP (BY SPEEDBOAT) TO THE AIRPORT ISLAND WHERE 500 WORKERS ARE RACING TO FINISH THE JOB BY EARLY 1980. WHEN HULULE IS READY FOR LARGE JETLINERS, TOURISM IN THE MALDIVES WILL NO LONGER BE DEPENDENT ON SRI LANKA

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AND INDIA, WHOSE ATTITUDES TO THEIR TINY NEIGHBOUR RANGE FROM A PATRONISING ALOOFNESS TO WHAT ONE OBSERVER CALLS "DOWNRIGHT ARROGANCE."

(IN INSET PORTION GIVING DIRECT QUOTES FROM INTERVIEW WITH NASIR).

Q: IS GAN THEN STILL UP FOR LEASE? A: GAN IS STILL UP FOR LEASE. IT HAS NOT BEEN TAKEN OFF THE MARKET. THERE'S A BIG DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A PRIVATE PARTY AND A GOVERNMENT.

Q: AM I CORRECT IN ASSUMING THAT GAN DEFINITELY WON'T
BE LEASED FOR MILITARY PURPOSES? A: YES, YOU ARE.

(SECOND INSET PORTION OF ARTICLE DESCRIBES VISIT
TO GAN BY COLTON AND THREE OTHER LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS)

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THE AIRFIELD IS THERE, WITH ITS 8,700-FT. RUNWAY AND
SERVICING APRON. SO ARE THE PORT FACILITIES (WHERE
ONCE, DURING WORLD WAR 11, 50 SHIPS WERE ANCHORED),
THE SWIMMING POOL, THE TENNIS AND SQUASH COURTS, THE
GOLF COURSE, THE GYMNASIUM, THE CINEMA, THE FULLY
EQUIPPED LAUNDRY, THE BAKERY, THE MILK-PROCESSING
PLANT. NOT TO MENTION A HOSPITAL, ELEVEN KITCHEN MESSES,
LARGE COLD-STORAGE FACILITIES, OIL-STORAGE TANKS,
A BOTANICAL GARDEN - AND 76 BLOCKS OF BARRACKS AND
OFFICERS' MESSES WITH ACCOMMODATION FOR 15,000
PEOPLE.

MUCH OF WHAT THE RAF LEFT BEHIND RATHER THAN PAY

TO SHIP BACK TO BRITAIN HAS BEEN TAKEN TO MALE AND
AUCTIONED: CHAIRS, BLANKETS, PILLOWS, BEDS AND OTHER
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EQUIPMENT...WHAT IS LEFT THERE - WHICH IS STILL A
GREAT DEAL - SHOWS SIGNS OF RUST AND MILDEW DESPITE
THE CAREFUL ATTENTION OF THE 120 MALDIVIANS WHO HAVE
STAYED ON TO LOOK AFTER THE PLACE. END QUOTE.

4. FULL TEXT OF ARTICLE POUCHED TO AMEMBASSY COLOMBO,
NEA/INS, AND PM/ISO. END UNCLASSIFIED.

5. BEGIN SECRET. COMMENT: DEFINITIVE DECISION BY
GOVERNMENT OF MALDIVES ON WHETHER HMS AMAZON CAN
VISIT MALDIVES NEXT MARCH WILL PRESUMABLY REFLECT
DEGREE OF ANTI-BRITISH FEELING REMARKED ON BY BRITISH
DEFENSE ATTACHE. IF VISIT IS AGREED TO, IT MIGHT
FACILITATE A CLOSER LOOK AT PRESENT STATE OF GAN'S
FACILITIES BY BRITISH MILITARY. IT IS NOT CLEAR
WHETHER BRITISH DEFENSE ATTACHE TALKED TO MISS
COLTON, BUT FCO NOTED TO US THAT SHE IS OF COURSE
NOT A TRAINED MILITARY OBSERVER. FCO ALSO POINTED
OUT TO US STATEMENT IN MISS COLTON'S ARTICLE THAT
MALDIVIANS ASSERT US SURVEILLANCE AIRCRAFT ARE OVER-
FLYING GAN. BRITISH DEFENSE ATTACHE IN HIS REPORT
MENTIONED POSSIBILITY THAT EITHER HE OR US DEFENSE
ATTACHE IN COLOMBO MIGHT VISIT GAN.

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Message Attributes

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